



## Pick Your Path to Health

### **Drinking and Sex: It's Riskier than You Think**

During the holiday season, we are tempted to indulge ourselves with food and alcohol at every turn. Office parties, restaurants, and bars all promote holiday events that usually include alcohol.

It's not a foregone conclusion, but research has shown that alcohol consumption increases the likelihood that women will have casual sex. These sexual encounters are often regretted. What's even more troubling, a survey sponsored by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), suggests there is a significant relationship between the amount of alcohol women report drinking each week and their experiences of sexual victimization.

#### **Know the facts**

Did you know that women are more sensitive to alcohol than men? According to NIAAA, they have less water in their bodies than men do (even men of the same weight), so a glass of wine will raise a woman's blood alcohol concentration level more than a man's. It also takes women's bodies longer to "process" alcohol, so the effects of a drink (or two) last longer.

NIAAA reports that women's drinking is most common between the ages of 26 and 34 and among women who are divorced or separated. Among racial groups, women's drinking is more prevalent among Caucasians, although African American women are more likely to drink heavily.

#### **Unexpected consequences**

Many women take oral contraceptives or use other methods to avoid becoming pregnant. However, women are not as careful when it comes to sexually transmitted diseases, especially teenagers and young women. The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases tells us that more than 13 million Americans a year (or 35,000 a day) contract a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Nearly two-thirds of these cases are diagnosed in people younger than 25. Chlamydia is the most common STD, with more than 4 million cases diagnosed each year. CDC reports that one in four women carries the herpes virus compared to one in five men.

STDs can go undetected for years, leading to infertility, pelvic inflammatory disease, cervical cancer, and other health problems. Using a condom and spermicide during sexual intercourse is one way to reduce-but not eliminate-the risk of infection.

Women of all ages need to protect themselves. Mothers should talk with their teenage daughters about the potentially multiple consequences of drinking alcohol and having sex-not just an unwanted pregnancy or HIV/AIDS, but long-term damage to vital organs, increased risk of victimization, and a host of sexually transmitted diseases.

### **Other Health Consequences**

NIAAA reports other findings about the effects of alcohol on women. When women and men drink at the same rate, women continue to be at higher risk than men for certain serious medical consequences of alcohol use, including liver, brain, and heart damage.

Although similar proportions of Caucasian and African American women drink heavily, African American women are more likely to experience related health problems such as liver impairments, and their offspring are at greater risk for fetal alcohol syndrome.

Compared with men, women develop alcohol-induced liver disease over a shorter period of time and after consuming less alcohol. Thousands of women die each year from chronic liver disease or cirrhosis. Animal research suggests that women's increased risk for liver damage may be linked to physiological effects of the female reproductive hormone estrogen.

There are many possible consequences that can occur as a result of drinking too much and having sex, the least of which is embarrassment. Don't spoil this otherwise festive time of year by putting yourself at risk for pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and health problems that could last a lifetime. Keeping this in mind will lead you down a path to better health.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For other tips on improving your health, or for more information on the Pick Your Path to Health campaign, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>.*